



Dinner seating is traditional in the bright, 446-seat Waldorf Restaurant.

Marco Polo

Continued

Rumor had it that the ships were rigged with high-tech spy equipment and, of course, there were occasional defections by asylum-seeking crew-members.

Soviet ships were not known for their warm, efficient service or gourmet cuisine, but they were extremely affordable and offered an interesting cultural diversion from the typical American cruise experience of the day. As the need for liner services dwindled, the *Alexandr Pushkin* and her sisters were refitted numerous times in an effort to bring them up to Western cruising standards. In 1990, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the cash-strapped *Alexandr Pushkin* was laid up at Singapore with an uncertain future.

At that time, travel entrepreneur Gerry Herrod was looking for a vessel to launch his

newly formed, destination-focused Orient Lines. The *Alexandr Pushkin's* ice-strengthened hull, solid construction, and far-ranging fuel capacity made her a perfect candidate for a complete top-to-bottom rebuild into a globetrotting, premium-market cruise liner. Between 1991 and 1993, she was rebuilt at a Greek shipyard where she emerged in her current configuration as the *Marco Polo*.

With Orient Lines, the vessel ventured throughout Southeast Asia, Europe, Antarctica, and even the Amazon on enrichment and culture-steeped cruises to exotic and less-visited ports. In 1998, Herrod sold Orient to Norwegian Cruise Line, which made an attempt to expand the brand. In 2008 NCL shut down Orient Lines and sold the *Marco Polo* to Greek-owned Global Maritime, which then chartered the ship to German-based Transocean Tours. When Transocean went bankrupt in 2010, the *Marco Polo* was again chartered to newly established Cruise & Maritime Voyages.



Tiered outdoor decks on the classic cruiser-spoon stern enhance the social interaction onboard.

Prior to its current inception, CMV was a popular charter broker in the U.K., representing cruise companies such as Classic International of Lisbon and Louis Cruises of Cyprus. CMV now operates two ships on a full-time basis, the *Marco Polo* and the 800-passenger/17,593-gross-ton *Ocean Countess* (built in 1976 as the *Cunard Countess*).

We recently embarked on the *Marco Polo* for a seven-night cruise from Tilbury (coincidentally from the same pier the *Alexandr Pushkin* frequented during her Atlantic crossings) to Cherbourg, Cobh, Belfast, and Liverpool. The voyage was a special "Maritime Heritage Cruise" saluting the *Lusitania* and *Titanic* (as well as a host of other more fortunate British ocean liners) on the 100th anniversary of the *Titanic's* sinking.

Despite, or rather thanks to, her age, the *Marco Polo* is a very striking ship, with a graceful profile and curvaceously pleasing architectural elements like sheer (a slight downward arc from bow to stern) and camber (a convex curvature toward the sides of the ship). She has nooks, intimate terraces, and more than her fair share of freshly scrubbed teak decking.

Her eight passenger decks begin at the top with Navigator (11), followed by Columbus (10), Amundsen (9), Magellan (8), Pacific (7), Atlantic (6), Baltic (5), and Caribe (4). Public rooms are concentrated on Magellan, with the gym, spa, and internet center aft on Columbus, the Scott Bar aft on Amundsen, and the Waldorf Restaurant midships on Atlantic.

Most spaces date from the 1993 rebuild and sport a pleasant Art Deco-style typical of the Athens-based AMK (Katzourakis) husband and wife design team that created them, with reflective ceilings, brushed steel, and marble that is occasionally offset with warm wood tones. In many areas, the somewhat stark AMK soft fittings and furnishings have been updated with more inviting and comfortable replacements, most notably the Captain's Club Bar, which spans the width of the ship on Magellan Deck. This lounge is particularly appealing with its autumnal color scheme, domed ceiling and small dance floor—by day, a great place to sip a cappuccino and watch the seas roll by; at night, a nice hub for pre-/post-dinner cocktails to the accompaniment of live music.

In addition to a cozy card room and conference center, there is a substantial library, filled primarily with travel guides and books dedicated to the geology, history, flora, and fauna of places the ship visits. Next-door is the handsome Palm Court gallery, a quiet daytime nook that eventually evolves into a nighttime spot for sing-alongs.

Entertainment varies from guest lecturers and quizzes to music recitals and two nightly production numbers in the 438-seat Marco

Polo show lounge. The talented Russian cast was most impressive in *From Russia With Love*, which featured folkloric music that would have made the *Alexandr Pushkin* proud. Night owls generally migrated to the Scott Bar for game shows, karaoke, and dance music that continued into the wee hours. Diehard gamers should note that the *Marco Polo* does not have a casino or even a token row of slot machines. In lieu of a midnight buffet, hot snacks are brought around to the main public rooms each evening.

Cuisine is well presented and plentiful, with a British bent. In the traditional, 446-seat Waldorf Restaurant, breakfast is open-seating with an egg and omelet station, a buffet with fruits, cereals, and yogurt, and a limited full-service menu. Lunch is also open-seating with a full-service menu in addition to a salad bar. Dinner is entirely full-service at assigned tables in early and late seatings. Courses include appetizers, soup and salad, entrees, and desserts. Standout dishes were a delicious chicken tandoori and the daily fish selection. Service from the largely Eastern



Superb maintenance keeps the Cegielski Sulzer workhorse power-plant smoothly running.

Topping the accommodations are two deluxe suites forward on Columbus Deck. Measuring 484 square feet, each has a separate bedroom with king-size bed, a walk-in closet, marble-surfaced bathroom with full tubs, and large living rooms with flatscreen televisions, DVD players, and a fridge. Four junior suites measure 253 sq. ft., while deluxe oceanview cabins measure 213 sq. ft. Six categories of outside cabins range from 125 to 161 square feet and come with varying layouts and picture-windows or portholes. Five categories of inside cabins range from 100 to 158 square feet.

Dress is casual by day, and in the evening there are three dress codes: formal (black tie or dark suit for men; evening gowns for women), informal (business suit, jacket and tie for men; pantsuits or dresses for women) and casual (collared shirts, slacks for men; blouses, sweaters, slacks, skirts for women).

The *Marco Polo* provides a cherished and all-too-rare cruising opportunity for those who miss classic travel aboard homey, human-scale ships. The product is geared for a largely British clientele, but we found our fellow passengers warm and welcoming to Americans and other nationalities willing to try a new experience. Again, this is not a vessel for those seeking the latest in floating wizardry, which is why the *Marco Polo* has found an appreciative niche market of cruisers that should keep her proudly roaming the high seas for many more years. The *Marco Polo* is currently scheduled on itineraries ranging from one to 35 nights that sail from the U.K. to Europe and the Mediterranean through October 2013.

For more information contact your travel agent or Cruise & Maritime Voyages USA (Cruise Travel Magazine), 500 South East 18th Court, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33316; log on to www.cruiseandmaritime.com; or call 855-206-4897. **CT**



One of the two spacious junior suites forward on Pacific Deck that offer great views but no balcony.

European staff was efficient but without much of the fuss and chatter of many American-based ships.

The casual, 370-seat *Marco's Bistro* is a buffet style eatery adjacent to the pool aft on Magellan Deck. English breakfast (eggs, beans, and thick bacon) is available here and also includes cold cuts, veggies, fresh fruit, yogurt, cereals, and muesli. Lunch consists of hot entrees, pasta, cold cuts, vegetables, salad fixings, breads, and desserts—plus burgers, hot dogs, and salad from the neighboring pool bar. A themed dinner (Italian, French, seafood, etc.) is offered here nightly.

Although the *Marco Polo* has no balconied staterooms, she does have a wide range of comfortable accommodations, all featuring individually controlled air-conditioning, television, dressing table with mirror, hair-dryer, wardrobes, dressers, direct-dial telephones, and bathrooms with shower, sink, and toilet (provided amenities include shampoo, conditioner, soap, bath gel, and moisturizer).



The recently updated Captain's Club Bar is now a more inviting and comfortable lounge.

A NEW LOOK AT

MARCO POLO

Classic Cruising, British-Style, On A Vintage Vessel From Cruise & Maritime Voyages

Photo-Feature By Peter Knego



With her ocean-liner profile, the *Marco Polo* looks right at home when docked at a historic trans-Atlantic port like Cobh (formerly Queenstown), Ireland.

Prior to the implementation of the latest SOLAS (international ship safety) regulations and the recent global economic slump, a number of classic cruise ships still plied the seven seas. These grande dames may have been lacking many of the features of today's megaliners, but they exuded an Old World grace and style that cannot be replicated. Now-lamented vessels like NCL's *Norway*, Sun Line's *Stella Solaris*, Premier's *Oceanic*, American Hawaii Cruises' *Independence*, Cunard's *Queen Elizabeth 2*, and Imperial Majesty's *Regal Empress* enjoyed a loyal following well into the new millennium.

Thankfully, one former ocean liner still lives on to defy the fates and the notion that bigger and flashier is better: the 1965-built/820-passenger/22,080-gross-ton *Marco Polo*, now sailing for Cruise & Maritime Voyages (CMV), based in the United Kingdom.

While her origins are not particularly

glamorous, the *Marco Polo* has as rich and varied a history as many of the more celebrated liners she has outlasted. Conceived and built behind the Iron Curtain at the height of the Cold War, she was originally named *Alexandr Pushkin*, the second in a class of five passenger ships built for the Soviet Union by the Mathias-Thesen Werft shipyard in East Germany. Named for Russian poets, these handsome vessels were quite advanced for their day. Their streamlined funnels sported the red and gold Soviet hammer and sickle, and their jet-black hulls were dressed up with white racing stripes and a red star at the tip of sharply raked, ice-strengthened bows.

The quintet was engined with enduring Cegielski Sulzer diesels that drove twin screws at a service speed of 20.5 knots, but provisions had been made (and ultimately shelved) for a speedy conversion to nuclear

power. While certainly not opulent, the two-class (130 first and 620 tourist) vessels were adequately equipped with several categories of cabin accommodation (most without private facilities), an entire deck of public rooms, a glass-enclosed outdoor pool, and fully encircling promenades. By Soviet standards, the liners were downright palatial, but they catered to a mostly non-Soviet emigrant clientele, ferrying mainly European passengers on worldwide liner voyages and even sporadic cruise service.

The *Alexandr Pushkin* operated on the Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), Helsinki, and London to Montreal trans-Atlantic route. During her heyday, she was the pride of the Soviet passenger fleet and even ventured to New York in the mid-to-late 1970s for occasional cruises in tandem with her youngest sister, the 1971-built *Mikhail Lermontov*.

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